

Title: The Melodramatic Appropriation of Katabatic Subtext in Chekhov's *On the High Road*

Author: Mila Shevchenko, University of Michigan

Peter Brooks regards the motif of descent as a pervasive pattern in melodrama. Michael Finke emphasizes the centrality of katabatic journey in Chekhov's oeuvre. Although *On the High Road* does not explicitly display the motif of katabasis, the play can be added to the corpus of texts which belong to the paradigm of 'descent.' A close reading of the play will show how, while employing one of the most conservative dramatic structures – the melodramatic form – Chekhov rearranges its constituents in such a way that the readily identifiable 'moral teleology' becomes frustrated. The function of the 'subterranean' motif subverts the essence of the dramatic clash.

Following Bernard Beckerman, this paper analyzes the function of the melodramatic mode within the context of the 'vertical method', examining the dramatic effect of a play's entirety by focusing on the structure of its segmental [scene] units. Beckerman differentiates two levels of segmental sequence. The first level (which I define as the micro- or interior level) incorporates the relationship between the elements within a segmental unit. The second level (or the macro-/external level) represents the relationship between entire units. Chekhov's elaboration of the descent motif in Scene I and II demonstrates a macro-level of interaction. Here the unfolding of the dramatic knot is effected by the progression of the descent subtext from one scene to the next. However, Scene III, IV, and V resolve the conflict by following a melodramatic scenario on the micro-level of the scene units.

Further, by applying Stanley Longman's concept of 'dramatic geography', I examine how the spatial interaction between the on- and off-stage domains is an important constituent of the katabatic 'masterplot'. The inn – the on-stage locus – represents a juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane. The pilgrims'/tramps' co-existence is a projection of two archetypal paradigms of journey – the spiritual and the existential. These two patterns of quest are interwoven, first, within the dynamics between the pilgrims and Merik, and, secondly, in the relationship of Merik and Bortsov. Chekhov explores katabasis in three hypostases – the pilgrims, penitently wandering the countryside, Bortsov, an impoverished landlord, and Merik, the tramp. On the other hand, the off-stage loci – Bortsovka and the nearby anonymous town, suggest both the starting point and the final destination of Bortsov's downfall. The nobleman's 'descent' to the 'lower depth' of the inn has predominantly a social dimension, while Merik mirrors and complicates such a katabasis, bringing into it an additional, existential dimension. Merik's arrival is a 'descent' to his personal, inner 'hell', and the inn itself allegorizes the Russian society of the time.